

Israel's Peril: Our Military-Industrial Bubble

by L. Fletcher Prouty

In March of 1970, the United States was asked to permit the sale of 25 to 35 F-4 Phantom jets to Israel. But the debate over the sale of these fighter-bombers subsided even before the conclusion of the cease-fire, largely because both sides realized that the latest F-4 cannot survive the defenses of the SAM III missiles and MIG-21-J fighters in Egypt. The truth is that the United States cannot really help Israel—not without sending American technical assistance and personnel to Israel, and perhaps not even then. Israel's acceptance of the cease-fire was inevitable.

The Middle East cease-fire, if it holds together, will be attributed by the United States Government to the power of American diplomacy. The government will not mention another crucial factor—the impotence of American weaponry in that situation. This is an unexpected state of affairs for the biggest weapon-builder in the world, and it is important to know how it happened.

A tactical evolution has been brought about by the introduction into Egypt in considerable numbers of the highly effective and deadly Soviet surface to air missile (SAM III) of the latest design and

modification. This is the same, or better, weapons system which U.S. pilots found so effective against them in North Vietnam. The Israeli Air Force is finding that its old French Mirage fighters and even its newer American F-4 jets are no match for the improved SAM. The Israelis report that Egyptian MIG's are being flown by Russian pilots; so while Egyptian defenses have stiffened with the proliferation of the SAM weapons, the Egyptian offense has become more effective with Russian pilots in Russian MIG's.

As Russian support of Egyptian forces increased and as the tempo of the war accelerated, Israeli losses of irreplaceable materiel mounted, and consumption and depletion of the military inventory became a serious factor in the life and death struggle of that country. The pressure upon the Israeli armed forces to improve in numbers and in capability has been tremendous. At one time Israel could strike swiftly and effectively into any target area of Egypt. Now the air defense capability of the Egyptian military forces has improved so much that Israeli aircraft have had to abandon deep penetration missions in favor of fast close-in strikes.

This change is a significant characteristic of the present Arab-Israeli conflict.

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It used to be possible for both sides to strike deep into the heartland of the other. The war had a surface perimeter beyond which ground forces seldom penetrated; but it had no effective third dimensional, or air warfare, limit. Gradually this situation has changed, and it is no longer true that the air space is unguarded. Israeli air defense capability makes Egyptian MIG fighter attacks costly to the Arabs, and most Egyptian attacks are limited to border strikes. At the same time, Israel now finds deep strikes unacceptably costly, and it has been forced to limit its fighter sweeps to perimeter targets in order to decrease losses. Israel cannot spare and cannot expend aircraft against Egyptian targets which have become so well defended that they are no longer worth the risks. Thus the air war on both sides has shrunk back toward the same border perimeter which contains the ground forces and a relative stalemate exists, with or without the cease-fire.

Israeli predominance in the Middle Eastern balance of power has gradually eroded since 1967, and U.S. assistance is unequal to the task of stemming the tide of Arab strength bolstered by Soviet arms and equipment. Technically, we could put nuclear missiles in Israel as Khrushchev did in Cuba; but such a move

is preposterous. The only help the Americans can give Israel has already been given—we helped them arrange a cease-fire. Nothing proves this point more positively than the dilemma created by the request for fighter aircraft for Israel: we do not have a combat-worthy aircraft in which Israeli pilots can “live in the air” over Egypt in the face of the SAM missile.

To the technically qualified and to the professional airman, this statement warrants clarification. An aircraft like the F-4—if in the hands of American pilots and tied directly to the most sophisticated logistical and electronic support—can probably operate effectively against targets defended by both the MIG-21-J and the SAM III. American pilots have aircraft available in sufficient numbers to assure some for radar suppression (ECM), some for such tactical variations as height-speed-course deception, and others for the primary attack mission. Furthermore, the entire effort can be linked to the factory sources for rapid ECM adjustment and resupply. Such support is not available to recipients of military aid, and will not be unless the United States is willing to take ominous steps toward an escalating, Vietnam-like involvement in Israel. These steps would include declassifi-

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cation of the ECM codes, a direct pipeline support for the highly complex electronic equipment of radar suppression, American technical assistance personnel, American pilots, and so on. It is suicidally insufficient merely to deliver the airplanes. And even an enormous, costly, American effort did not always assure effective military operations (against less developed air defenses) over North Vietnam.

Whereas the conflict in Indochina permits either adversary the opportunity to lay back and lick his wounds, this is not true in the Middle East war. At every opportunity each side attacks the other with the best he has and probes continually to find weak and exposed spots where attack will be the most favorable and effective. It is this tactic in the Middle East which has led to the necessity for the cease-fire, because the losses sustained by the Israelis have become unbearable.

In the Middle East, where the war is being fought by two adversaries utilizing modern weapons, the relative tactical merit of each weapons system is of critical importance. It has not taken the Russians long to equip the Egyptians with the same weapons system (SAM) which had proven itself so thoroughly effective against the F-4 in North Vietnam. This action has drastically reduced the value of the Mirage and the F-4 in the Middle East, and as a result we have seen the diminution of the once urgent request for F-4 type aircraft by the Israelis. Israel might accept these aircraft on general principles and might fly them against other targets, but they no longer have tactical value against the well-defended targets in Egypt.

This is but one facet of a complex strategic matter, but it is a most important one and a most decisive one. With-

out the F-4, without the ill-fated, un-flyable F-111, without any aircraft in the U.S. inventory that can “live in the air” in Israeli hands against the improved SAM, what does Israel do?

The Israeli situation presents us with a real war confrontation. Up to now our great military behemoth has been able to fumble along with one eye over the nuclear warfare horizon and the other on a homegrown counterinsurgency conflict in which “the enemy” has never had the capability to mount a meaningful and sophisticated counterattack. Any weapon was good enough for Vietnam, where the once-proud B-52 performs deforestation projects in every part of Indochina where there is known to be no opposition. On the other hand, if we are to supply any arms to Israel, those arms must be battle-worthy and must be superior to those of the Arabs.

The size and scope of the problem is momentous. Can Israel use the M-16 handgun? Will the Israelis in their desperation request legions of “Green Berets” and their peculiar type of warfare? Will the Israelis deploy the U.S. Navy heavy weapon for Indochina, a re-de-moth-balled battleship *New Jersey*, a few miles off the coast of Egypt to shell shore targets? Could the Israelis feel secure behind a field of electronic sensors which at best could tell them that an Egyptian force of modern tanks and other military equipment was on the way? Can the Israelis use thousands of helicopters exposed rotor to rotor along countless miles of runways unprotected from any attack? Is there anything that we have been using in Indochina which can be of help to any country under attack by modern munitions?

It was President Eisenhower who first warned of the dangers of the military-

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industrial complex, and the Great Debate of 1969 concerned itself with this massive problem. From Eisenhower to the present, the discussion of American militarism has been concerned with the belief that this country should fear the combined weight of the military and the munitions industry. It has been feared that the combination would lead the country down the road to ever increasing militarism for the power and glory of generals and admirals, for the political aggrandizement of fellow-traveling politicians, and for the boundless enrichment of the munitions industry.

These are certainly matters of grave concern; but in today's complex world they are far from the only considerations. The great tragedy which is being discovered now is that the military-industrial complex has created a bubble, a balloon, a totally useless national military capability, with the morbid exception that if we chose to use all of our nuclear missiles in a first-strike attack on Russia we might expect to destroy that country.

While everyone focused on the obvious issues of Pentagon hyperpower—overkill and the huge weapons establishment—no one was watching the other end of the military machine. It was almost unnoticed that all this country was getting in the way of weapons for all of the hundreds of billions of dollars spent were useless, unfit, outdated, and inconsequential items such as the TFX planes, unworkable tanks, unflyable heavy helicopters, limited capacity weapons such as the M-16 small hand gun, costly non-combatant frills such as defenseless helicopters (4000 lost in South Vietnam against little opposition, if any), and few if any improvements in the Naval arsenal. The past decade of armament development consumed more

money and came up with fewer effective weapons than any like group and period in any time in history.

Eisenhower, Shoup, and all of the others have been right in warning that one of the most important problems facing this country was the military-industrial complex. But the reasons which they gave for their warning have been overtaken by events which have proven that while this boundless and voracious combine has been devouring hundreds of billions of dollars it has failed to produce military weapons which were second to none. In real warfare, on the battlefield, there are no second-best weapons.

This is the tragedy of the New American Militarism. It has produced a vast military machine with so much power at the nuclear end of the scale that it has not even come face to face with the issue of the usefulness and control of such power. It has produced at the other end of the scale so much nearly useless hardware that the only place possible to expend it without exposing its tactical insignificance has been in the little countries of Indochina. As a result, even the suggestion of the use of these weapons in a modern hot war, such as that which has been going on in the Middle East since 1967, uncovers the weakness of the whole house of cards.

There is a great debate currently over the wisdom of Robert McNamara's strategic doctrine of flexible response. Supporters applaud it for moving us away from the "brinkmanship" and "massive retaliation" of the Dulles era, while critics attack the doctrine for sucking us into wars of escalation, such as Vietnam. Whatever strategic thinking prevails, the United States invites disaster when it acts, as in Israel, on an illusion of power. ■